

Whitewash: On Keith Windschuttle's Fabrication of Aboriginal history edited by Robert Manne. Melbourne: Black Inc., 2003, pp. 385, A\$29.95, paperback, ISBN 097 507 690 6.



This collection contains seventeen essays (and one document) replying to attacks on mainstream historians by Keith Windschuttle, through *Quadrant* and his own self-published book, *The fabrication of Aboriginal history. Vol. I, Van Diemen's Land 1803-1847* (Sydney: Macleay Press, 2002), a title which is undoubtedly not italicised here. The longest contribution, by James Boyce, is a tour de force from a graduate student. The authors expose weaknesses in Windschuttle's methodology. Early Van Diemen's Land produced much official paperwork. Windschuttle's mistake was to assume that because records were extensive, they must also be comprehensive. Hence an unreported Aboriginal death was one that never happened. On the same basis, Manne suggests, one could conclude there was no sexual abuse of children in western societies until recent times. Others point out that government sources did not systematically note Aboriginal deaths until 1827, and probably not effectively even then. It was hard to know what happened 'on the other side of the frontier'. Maybe relatively few Blacks were killed by settler guns (although, as Mark Finnane points out, the statistical rate of violent death was still 'extraordinarily high') but what happened to the wounded who crawled away into a society that knew only herbal medicine? The documents do indeed show that only three percent of the island had been officially granted by 1823, but settler penetration on the contested grounds was much greater. Calling his tormentor 'biased and cantankerous', Henry Reynolds points out that Windschuttle never mentions that Sir George Arthur, governor at the time of the 'Black War', had specific instructions from London to 'oppose by force' and treat hostile Aborigines as if they were an invading enemy. Martin Krygier and Robert van Krieken point to the ambiguity in Windschuttle's assessment of Christianity, portrayed as a value system which must have inhibited violence, while its practitioners were the very do-gooders whose interventions destroyed Aboriginal society. Archaeologists Tim Murray and Christine Williamson refute the absurdity of Windschuttle's view of a dysfunctional society that providentially managed to cling to life for 30 000 years before coincidentally collapsing in the first forty years of European contact. Replying to Windschuttle's challenges to the accuracy of her footnotes, Lyndall Ryan vindicates her scholarly integrity while acknowledging not 'fabrications' but some 'infractions': her evidence does exist in the documents and newspapers, even if not one hundred percent in the ones she actually cited. Ryan adopts the Warren Hastings defence, proclaiming herself astonished by the accuracy of her referencing when she was the first academic to tackle the archival material. While Tasmania is the principal focus of the row, Windschuttle's claims about mainland events are also covered. He doubted a reported massacre in 1915 at Mistake Creek in the Kimberleys, arguing that it depended upon oral evidence of a seventy-one year old Gija, Peggy Patrick, who apparently claimed her mother as a victim. But as Patrick's statement makes clear, she speaks 'blackfella' and not 'high' English, and

was referring to her 'mum mother' (i.e. grandmother). It was unnecessary of A. Dirk Moses to imply that revisionists suffer from a castration complex, but he is correct to challenge Windschuttle to prove he is not an outright 'denier', an Australian David Irving. As Moses says, Reynolds and Ryan have accepted Windschuttle's criticisms where valid; his own response to the counter-attack in *Whitewash* will demonstrate whether this is a lively debate or a witch hunt. And, as Krygier and van Krieken remind us, even if there were never a single massacre, there was still a wholesale dispossession of other people's land.

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7 December 2005